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Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

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SYNOPSIS OF REMARKS ON "ABRAHAM LINCOLN"
BY RICHARD YATES, Ex-Governor of Illinois,
on February twelfth, Lincoln's Birthday,
at _____.

I cannot attempt an address on the life of Abraham Lincoln. I will be content with mentioning a few of the things in which he excelled preeminently. I call your attention to five of his characteristics. I will speak to you of Lincoln the Orator, Lincoln the Lover, Lincoln the Overcomer, Lincoln the Politician and Lincoln the Chosen Champion of the Almighty.

ORATOR

I remark in the first place that he was a real orator, peer of any. The first inaugural address with its phrase, "The mystic chords of memory", the second, with its phrase, "With malice toward none, with charity for all", the Gettysburg address, with its phrase, "Of the people, by the people, for the people", and the little talk to his neighbors and friends, on the rainy morning that he left Springfield, are not excelled in the whole field of English literature. In a speech at Columbus, Ohio, on the 13th of February, 1861, he said:

"There has fallen upon me a task such as did not rest even upon the Father of his Country; and feeling so, I cannot but turn and look for that help without which it will be impossible for me to perform the great task; I turn then, and look for help, to the great American people and to that GOD who has never forsaken them."

You and I know that by such appeals he obtained the help that he prayed for - received it from twenty million loyal hearts and from the Infinite Power on High; that he put one hand into the outstretched palm of the American people and with the other he laid a strong hold upon the almighty arm of the Almighty GOD, and standing there, supported by Humanity and supported by Divinity, he fought the grandest fight and won the grandest victory since the Savior walked among the sons of men two thousand years ago.

LOVER

I remark in the second place, that he was a real lover, a paragon among lovers, ardent in the extreme, giving his whole heart to his beloved sweetheart, dear ones of the family, his friends, his country. He offered his hand, in his youth, to four different girls, Sarah Rickard, Mary Owen, Ann Rutledge and Mary Todd. He married Mary Todd, a Kentucky girl, high strung, high spirited, educated to the handle, well equipped, a social leader, and naturally properly ambitious. And he made a model husband, and she a model wife. But before that, he was rejected by two, Sarah Rickard and Mary Owen, who did not comprehend him; and he was accepted, whole-heartedly, by Ann Rutledge, of Menard County. To that lovely girl he told the old, old story of man's love for woman, as old as it is sweet, thank GOD, and as sweet as it is old, thank GOD. He whispered it into her blushing ear, as she sat at the quilting frame, and stitched and stitched and stitched, in the days of the old quilting bee. It is no wonder that when Ann Rutledge suddenly sickened and died, the young Lincoln's reason tottered on its throne and left its seat. Yes, that mighty heart and mind and soul and spirit, which, in later years, could look without panic upon a flaming world in arms, all fell prostrate when a young girl died down in Menard County. Would you have had it otherwise? Are you not glad he had a heart that was gentle enough to break? I am. It is the opinion of the survivors of those who knew him best, that it was the cherished memory of the loved and lost one that contributed, as much as anything, to make him what he was called, - the saddest man of his time. As for me, I believe we would never have had the Lincoln we love today had he not himself loved and loved madly. I love to think that every man like Washington and Lincoln, who really kept the flag in the sky, fought, when he fought, like an enraged lion, and loved, when he loved, with all his might.

OVERCOMER

I remark in the third place that he was the Overcomer, a Knight of the Sublime Order of Disappointment. From his earliest childhood his life was crowded full of griefs and bereavements, humiliations and disappointments, keen and crushing. At the age of nine in the forests of Indiana he underwent the loss of his mother, sobbing his little heart out in that awful hour, in a log cabin without a floor. With a yearning to learn, he was denied access to almost all books. With a heart and soul in tune with poetry and song, he was, he himself said, possessed of a voice, face and form alike unfortunate. Desiring to engage in business, he attempted several enterprises, all disastrous. He was burdened with debt, until after his election to Congress at the age of forty. Desiring to serve in the Legislature, he was at first unsuccessful. Even when a candidate for Congress and Senator he underwent the indescribable humiliation of being misunderstood. I am satisfied that in all this, Adversity and GOD were making a man - a MAN that could not be appalled. And such a man they made.

BELIEVER

I remark in the fourth place that he was, in a nineteenth century sense, a champion of the Almighty. He was religious, though not denominational. He never lost his faith in Divine Providence. All his religious utterances breathe a simple, childlike faith. He studied and carried with him on the old circuit, not only the "Fables" of Aesop and the "Plays" of Shakespeare, but the "Pilgrims Progress" of Bunyan and the Bible. Is it not a comfort to know this; the Bible and Shakespeare: can we do better? It has been claimed that he was godless or at least agnostic. It cannot be true. To his stepmother he wrote, when his father was dying, "Our great, good and merciful Maker will not turn away from him in any extremity". To General Dan Sickles he said, "When I heard that General Lee was marching on Gettysburg. I went into a little room at the White House, where nobody goes but me, and I prayed to the Lord God Almighty as I never had prayed before". Oh, blessed little room where our Lincoln prayed for us, before the Living God! To Mrs. Bixby he wrote, "I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement". And in his second inaugural address he said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether". And Nicolay and Hay publish in the "Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln", the thing they call "Meditation on the Divine Will" in which he wrote, in a memorandum not written to be seen by men, "By his mere great power on the minds of the now contestants he could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest". I have never read words showing greater faith in GOD.

POLITICIAN

I remark in the fifth place that Abraham Lincoln was a consummate politician, of signal sagacity and shrewdness; a past-master of political maneuver and tactics, intrigue and strategy, enabling him to divine the purposes and motives of men and thereby to discern the development of events. He had a sublime and supreme regard for the truth, but within that high enclosure, as one of his biographers says, he was as ambitious as any man of his time. The time was, in this country of ours, when to grow up and serve the American Republic was the fondest and dearest aspiration of the American youth. Well will it be for America when that time shall come again; and when fathers will say, as mine did, "My son, I want you to grow up and serve the Republic", instead of saying, as many now do, "Anything but politics, my son, anything but politics". Men who seek public preferment, who aspire to the honors and awards of the public service, and who therefore attempt to serve their country in official position, either through appointment or election, are not on that account to be condemned. Mr. Lincoln took this view of this matter. He never hesitated to seek public preferment and never thought it beneath true manhood to do so. When the list of offices and positions to which Mr. Lincoln aspired is considered, it presents an array sufficient to astound every advocate of the theory that "the office should seek the man, and not the man the office." The captaincy of a militia company, the postmastership of a village, the deputy surveyorship of a county, the circuit judgeship pro tem, the honorary position of delegate to a convention, the honorary position of presidential elector, the appointive position of Commissioner General of the Land Office, the office of representative in the legislature, the office of Representative in Congress, the office of United States Senator, and the unsurpassable distinction of President of the United States, a round dozen political positions, were all

sought by him; he did not hesitate; he did not consider any of them too small or too large. He favored political organization, and he was right. In November 1858, an Illinois legislature was to be elected, which would elect a United States Senator. Fourteen months before, in other words, in September, 1857, he wrote a letter to my father, saying, in his usual and famous sentences of words of one syllable:

"And now, let me say
I wish you would
make up your mind to
come to the legislature
from Morgan next time.
You can be elected and
I doubt some, whether any
other friend can. It will
be a sacrifice to you but
can you not make it?"


In this same letter he commends J. O. Johnson who "is a newcomer, but he can devote more time to getting up an organization than any one I know, who knows, as well as he, how to do it". Real organization! O, let us encourage our young, our bravest and best, to serve the Nation!

CONCLUSION

One of the greatest things ever said about Abraham Lincoln was said by George Bancroft, the great historian. The occasion was a joint session of the Congress of the United States. The date was February twelfth, 1866, the first February twelfth, the first Lincoln's Birthday, after the assassination of the Martyred President. The place was the Capitol at Washington. The assemblage included not only the famous Senate of that time and the famous House, but also a Diplomatic Corps of unmatched brilliancy, a Supreme Court never equalled, a distinguished and aggressive President and Cabinet, and a throng of Civil War heroes and popular idols, generals and admirals of world-wide fame.

In that great address, the great Bancroft said that the great Lincoln was blessed with the wisdom that is like unto the wisdom of little children, and that from and through that wisdom came the relief that the wisdom of the wise and of those who were great after the flesh, had not been able to give. I am sure that Abraham Lincoln did have that wisdom. He had the truth of the child, and above all the forgiveness of the child. The result was that "the common people heard him gladly", even as it is written of Jesus Christ, and when he was martyred the same common people cried in the streets.

My own father said of Lincoln that he trusted the people, and they him; that there was something in his lowly origin and in the story of his life and its struggles, that made the people draw close to him; that he talked to them in such a way that they understood him better than they did other men. Knowing, as I do, that my father served as War Governor of Illinois during the four years Lincoln served as War President, and that he was in conference with President Lincoln a hundred times, and before that had practiced law with him in all the courthouses of the old circuit for 25 years, I have confidence in this estimate. For myself, I believe he was the interpreter and translator, possessing the wisdom that is like unto that of the child.



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